World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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GUEST: Thomas Weiss
Co-Director
United Nations Intellectual History Project

JOURNALIST: Thalif Deen, InterPress Service
John Metzler, USA Radio Network

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

UN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

The City University of New York Graduate Center is producing a landmark intellectual history of the United Nations in the world economy. Aimed at examining the UN's contributions to economic and social discourse since 1945, the project will review those ideas and concepts that have emerged from the last half-century of UN deliberations and that continue to energize international public policy. Such areas as trade and finance, preferential access, the gender revolution, poverty elimination, human rights, sustainability and responses to international economic crises will be featured. In this episode of **World Chronicle**, Thomas Weiss, Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, discusses the massive undertaking of writing the United Nations' intellectual history.

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Executive Producer:	Chaim Litewski
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Corazon A. Icasas

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Throughout the past fifty years, the United Nations has been the principal international forum for developing and disseminating ideas. Many concepts have originated in the imagination and dreams of the men and women who have worked for international organizations. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said that "at its best, the United Nations has always been rooted in powerful ideas with human dimensions." Three experts on United Nations issues have began a massive undertaking: to write the United Nations intellectual history. The project will analyse the evolution of key ideas and concepts about international economic and social development born or nurtured under UN auspices. This huge project is being financed by European governments and major international foundations.

Our guest today is the co-director of the United Nations Intellectual History Project. He is Thomas Weiss, Professor at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York. Joining me to talk with Mr. Weiss are Thalif Deen of *interPress Service* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network*.

Mr. Weiss, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Professor Weiss, forgive me if I sound a bit like the devil's advocate, but your project implies that the United Nations is, if not the font of all wisdom, at least it has a great deal of wisdom – some people might quarrel with that – and in such a politicized organization as the UN, how valuable really is the material that you're likely to amass?

WEISS: Well, Michael, the proposition behind this project is that whether there is another technical assistance project or another peacekeeping operation, in the long run that's perhaps not as consequential as the fact that major ideas strike people inside and outside the United Nations is important. Those ideas help define and redefine national interests, they help define and redefine priorities and these ideas then become embedded in institutions, not just this one, but in governments, NGO's and elsewhere and have a force of their own. So in and of themselves these ideas are important. This is quite different from a treatment of the institution *per se*, which is, like I say, of no interest to us but is a secondary interest behind the ideas.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now, the people whose input you are going to be tapping are

they mainly, for want of a better word, bureaucrats from within the system or are they going to be delegates, government representatives, elected officials, and so on?

WEISS: These would mainly be persons who have been associated with the institution itself or with parts of the UN system. Some of these may, indeed, be temporarily with the system. For example, Amartya Sen, who just won the Nobel Prize in Economics, has been associated with a number of key studies throughout the last 30 years and so his view, or the view of someone like Albert Hirschman, who was a critic of the institution, a critic of the ideas, will also be part of both the oral history as well as, we hope , of the analytical history we're coming up with.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have you had any reaction from Washington to this project where there is a certain amount of antipathy toward the UN?

WEISS: A certain amount, I think, is a fair summary of the atmosphere in Washington. In our exercise at passing the hat we have not received any favourable response. However, colleagues, friends of mine who are in the mission or who are in Washington are considerably less antagonistic toward the institution, than are members of Congress and actually do see this as an important story to be told. For those of us who are interested in perhaps putting forward the UN's if not best foot, better foot, in this country, it seems to me there's a lot of information here that could be useful.

DEEN: Professor, a widely-held view is that some of the major UN contributions have been in the field of economic and social development, not so much in politics. You know, agencies like UNICEF, WHO had contributed more than the Security Council or the General Assembly. Would you subscribe to this view?

WEISS: Well, actually I'm going to sound a little bit like a professor here on the one hand and on the other hand that -- as a matter of fact, in the last 15 years much of my own work is focussed on the security side -- on the peacekeeping, peace enforcement, peacemaking side. Certainly, within this country and as well as in much of the western world, what the United Nations does on the security side gets top billing and is in fact what determines, I believe, basically the reaction or antipathy or support in capitals. It's almost a mirror image in much of the developing world where some of the security efforts are looked at somewhat askance while the efforts at helping statistics, technical assistance, reconceding norms related to economic and social development, trying to make human rights something other than individual political ones in thinking about access to resources, are just as

important. And if one looks at the expenditures of the UN system across the board from 1945 to today, in fact probably 85 or 90 percent of what goes on the staff resources went to economic and social development. It's really only in the post-Cold War era that we've seen this burgeoning of security operations and humanitarian operations and that's what's now on the news. So one of the aims of this project is in fact to try to restore that balance indeed between security and economic and social development.

DEEN: I also noticed that funding for the project comes mostly from these ten nations.

WEISS: Yes.

DEEN: What is the reaction of developing countries to this project?

LITTLEJOHNS: Developing countries surely don't have the money to put in a project like this?

DEEN: But even then, what is their reaction to the project?

WEISS: Actually, the reaction has been quite supportive, certainly not in terms of funding or finances but we've had a couple of meetings in New York with the ambassadors to try to spell out what we're hoping to do because the story is not a story of the funders or of that part of the international community, it's certainly many of the major players, lots of major ideas come from all parts of the world. So even though they're not contributing financially they are actually quite behind the whole effort.

METZLER: Professor, the UN has rightly prided itself on the international economic assistance to these developing countries what about the famous figure of 0.7 percent, that famous quotient of GNP that countries were either suggested voluntarily or coerced a little bit to give to UN development efforts? Where did this start speaking about the intellectual history of the UN?

WEISS: I wish you were asking one my co-directors, Richard Jolly, who's actually involved in setting this targets. But this cropped up as a result of the good wishes that were expressed during the first development decade and the notion was good wishes need to take a concrete form and one needs to have a specific bar at a specific height over which to jump, and so it got infused into the second development decade. Whether who came up with that – that's one of the stories we're going to try to tell and we hope through a monograph that we're commissioning on the history of development assistance, as well as different views from different parts of the world about the nature of development assistance

nd its legacy, in addition to the oral history that would be involved in that part of the story ill be told better than it has before.

METZLER: But of course that percentage is an arbitrary amount to be sure, but me countries probably have met it – the Scandinavians, Danes, especially – but have any f the countries say within the European Community such as France or Germany come near at figure?

WEISS: No, no one near. Less than half the figure. And so you might say that is is an idea that was quite facetious almost or disingenuous to even have agreed to putting is on the table but indeed it's been used within certain government ministries and ureaucracies in order to try to move closer to 0.7 although very few countries – if I'm not istaken just a couple in Scandinavia – have actually gone over it.

METZLER: Well, it's a benchmark.

DEEN: When you talk of the intellectual history of the UN you will be ocussing primarily on the past – the past history of the UN. What about the future – the UN f the next millennium? Do you plan to tackle this?.

WEISS: That's right. Well, actually in some preliminary discussions when we ere trying to get this project off the ground, we did have around the table that's slightly rger than this one, some historians were taken slightly to task because in the actual title of e document – we've called it "A Future-Oriented Intellectual History" – and we were told at we were sort of skewing history by focussing on certain items. And it is indeed the case. Ve're picking up the ideas from the past that we think have a certain residence today and in e next couple of decades. These are important ideas – development assistance, which has een around for sometime, economic and social rights which have been around for some me, gender, which has been around for a long time. But the framing of the issue for the ext century has been around for considerably less than either development assistance or uman rights. So the ideas that we have spelled out we hope have indeed some policy elevance in the next quarter century and we think that these are the important ideas of the st 50 years. But indeed there are some ideas and some very bad ideas and we will be ooking at some of those, by the way, through the oral history but not in the major way rough monographs.

LITTLEJOHNS: Give us a few examples of bad ideas.

WEISS: My bad idea will be your good idea, I'm sure. But there have been a

certain number of ideas that came up -- for instance the new international information order -- which most of you people would have certainly supported ...

LITTLEJOHNS: That was certainly a bad idea.

WEISS: That was certainly a bad idea. But my sense here is that this was part of a certain kind of euphoria that surrounded the creation of what was supposed to be an international economic order which revolves around the notion of redistribution of power and resources which is still with us. And this was applied somewhat haphazardly in UNESCO and I would say this was unequivocally a bad idea did not last very long.

LITTLEJOHNS: As a result the United States got out of UNESCO.

WEISS: Yes, this is right. This is one of the causes. But my sense is that when we're looking at the new international economic order, for example, and talking to people who were responsible for framing it, for people who thought that it should have been framed more abrasively and aggressively, those who thought that it didn't involve an accommodation with the West, for example, my guess is certainly that the new international economic information order will come out in these conversations. And if there is enough, indeed, this could be a small portion of an eventual history of good and bad ideas.

LITTLEJOHNS: So these bad ideas will be sort of lessons learned?

WEISS: That's right.

METZLER: Recording these ideas and observations of the past players in the game, I've looked through the proposal and I've seen that the oral history class plays a very strong role wasn't this really done back in 1995 at the fiftieth anniversary? There were so many in the Library, there are so many oral histories done, with so many players in the UN system, that literally right across the board now ....

WEISS: No. What actually has been done or has almost been completed is an oral history of the security side, in particular of major conflicts that the United Nations has been involved with. Quite amazingly, the economic and social side has been really ignored -- largely ignored -- virtually absent, and it's that part of the story. For some of the reasons we've talked about earlier that seems have been shortchanged and where we think there's a lasting contribution. So the oral history will indeed be about half of our efforts over the next five years.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Thomas Weiss, Co-Director of the United Nations Intellectual History Project.

Professor Weiss, when you've assembled, collated and done whatever with this material, how is it going to be presented to the public at large?

WEISS: Well, we are looking into this. I must admit that I am technologically challenged and therefore many of the newest ways of distributing this material we're only beginning to look into. We're hoping, for example, that the body of oral history materials will eventually be placed on CDS and made available to historians in Kuala Lumpur as well as here at the Dag Hammarskjold Library. We're also hoping eventually to mobilize enough resources to do some video to accompany the audio oral history which will obviously be shorter, perhaps punchier, and be mixed with images related to the actual substance either of discussions about an issue like sustainability, or pictures of the problems when you don't think about sustainability, or perhaps efforts to introduce sustainability into a concrete development projects. So this, we believe, would have -- it sure would certainly make the history come alive in different ways for people in various parts of the world. So this would be an accompanying step which we have not as yet taken but our plans are in the next year or so to begin to try to think about an experiment or a short 20 or 25-minute teaser video that might be useful in order to try to get television stations and other kinds of producers interested in building on the oral history and making different products available.

LITTLEJOHNS: So can the UN make some money out of this?

WEISS: Actually, the project is supposed to make some money out of this. No, my sense is that none of these ideas will make much money but we're hoping to do a very thorough job on the history and make this as widely available and disseminate this as widely as possible in the next five to seven or eight years.

DEEN: Professor, besides diplomats and high ranking UN officials, do you plan to talk to people at the grassroots level how the UN has impacted on their lives?

WEISS: Actually, you're not the first person to have asked that question and indeed in speaking about oral history there really are various ways to go about an oral history. One is what you described, what we're doing, which is an elite version of oral history. We're trying to get at the ideas, we're trying to see how these ideas grew up, how they were nurtured and how they became part and parcel of government, inter-governmental and non-governmental policies. So we actually are focussing on people who are in or outside of the system but at a very senior level. There is a form of oral history which obviously is even more difficult to carry out which involves speaking to everyone -- between

the Secretary-General and the proverbial woman on the street – who might have views about gender relations and the UN's views on gender. This project, as it is, is fairly ambitious. I will have more gray hairs than I have now by the time it's finished. I would welcome a chance to inject some of that. But at this point it's really too ambitious for our undertaking.

METZLER: Once again, on the subject of development assistance, rather than speaking to those proverbial elites who are high ranking bureaucrats what about speaking to those people in the field that have profited from the United Nations? Somebody who may be a teacher in Tanzania who 25 years ago had been helped by a programme or what-have-you? This kind of a very hands-on experience?

WEISS: We certainly will be using this material we hope to liven up some of the monographs in the book, the book resulting from the project. My sense is that would be an ideal kind of topic to mix into the video. The technique of oral history requires doing an immense amount of research on a person's background and on writings and career in order to sit down and conduct seven, eight, ten hours of sustained interviews. This would be obviously more sketchier, perhaps more lively and indeed should be used in terms of the video that we hoped will be educational.

METZLER: Perhaps these could be little vignettes that surround the larger story as you're discussing?

WEISS: Right.

DEEN: During the course of your research, I am sure you have access to the archives, UN documents, what about confidential memos that came out of the Secretary-General's – Office of the Under-Secretary-General?

WEISS: Well, we're hoping that – well the Secretary-General, first I must say, has been terribly supportive of this whole undertaking. Has helped in mobilizing some of the resources that we now have on board for this project. The archives will be open to us. What we're even more interested in are things that are probably not in the archives, that are probably in the attic or the basement of many of the people whom we're going to interview. In fact it's quite alarming for historians – I'm not a historian but I'm an amateur historian though – to see the kinds of documents that routinely get thrown out every time someone dies. And indeed one might make an argument that this project really should have started 20 or 25 years ago because many of the major figures – somebody like Mahbub Ul-Haq who just died last year – was a major figure.

LITTLEJOHNS: Who was the person , the architect of the UN Development Report.

WEISS: I mean his papers are still around because his wife is a professional and she has her own institute and are still around so we will have access to those. But there are other persons who played a substantial role and their papers are now gone or lost or misplaced. So what we're hoping that in parallel to this project that governments will begin to try to put their own archives in order. For example, the United Kingdom has established an important archive – the Bodleian Library – in which the papers of United Kingdom citizens who worked for the United Nations are archived and put in order. It seems that Sweden and other countries should do the same thing. Similarly, there are very poor, inadequately funded and put together archives in all the major specialized agencies and organizations within the system. So we're hoping that there will be a parallel level of that – parallel level effort in both institutions and governments to try to keep these archives intact, otherwise future generations – both scholars and journalists and public officials – will not have access to this historical information.

LITTLEJOHNS: So what is the genesis of this project? Was Kofi Annan behind it? I mean who came up with the idea?

WEISS: Actually about 20 years ago one of the major figures in the United Nations, Sydney Dell, for whom I worked when I was in UNCTAD and who was the head of the Transnational ....

LITTLEJOHNS: UN Conference on Trade and Development.

WEISS: That's right, I'm sorry. And he was also the head of the Transnational Corporations Centre here in New York, thought that it was time to do something like this. He unfortunately died and was unable to mobilize resources to do this. A couple of years ago, Richard Jolly, who was giving a lecture at the conference that I organized in Italy for the Academic Council on the United Nations System, he and I, over perhaps a couple of glasses of merlot, began revisiting Sydney Dell's idea and we said it's time to do this and we committed ourselves to trying to make that happen. And little by little we put together groups to look at the issue. We did a couple of project documents and then, significantly enough, the Secretary-General was quite supportive of the idea. We received some seed money from foundations and governments and we're about halfway toward the target we think we need.

LITTLEJOHNS: Richard Jolly, who is now the Coordinator of the Development Report having succeeded Mahbub Ul-Haq, ran into a bit of flack over the latest report because he suggested some kind of international tax which would raise money for developing countries to get on the Internet. Do you anticipate any political flack from what you may produce?

WEISS: I hope we're visible enough to get some political flack. My sense is, that we're going to be telling stories which have many sides. We're hoping to tell those stories in a fair way but we'll clearly have our own views about which side of the story we favour. So I suspect that we will be accused by numerous parties. I think one of the important things that the Secretary-General himself insisted upon this, is that this project is associated with the United Nations where we all spent part of our lives here. We have -- colleagues and friends are here but this is an independent project that is located -- the Secretariat is located at the Graduate Centre of the City University of New York so that we will be able to tell the story in a way we think it needs to be told without either our funders, the Secretariat, or a journalist giving us too much criticism.

LITTLEJOHNS: Warts and all?

WEISS: Yes. There will be many warts indeed. In fact, the warts will probably be interesting parts of the oral history. In fact, my own reading of the previous Secretary-General's book, some of the most interesting parts of the story are the flashy warts and side bars, you would say, in a book. And that's what people remember. And so I hope that our own history will be very much alive in the same way and people will disagree and agree as they see fit.

METZLER: So a report like this is going to be -- what do you think it shall say?

WEISS: My sense is that one will be surprised at the extent to which the United Nations has been central to, if not spawning at least massaging and keeping alive very critical issues which are now part and parcel of public policy discourse and which are part of government efforts, non-governmental organizations when they implemented development projects, individuals when they try to conceive of how they put together their household expenditures. These big notions are important to all of us and it seems to me that at the end of the day it will be those ideas that will be the primary legacy of the United Nations rather than any more specific projects.

DEEN: Do you need more funding for the project?

WEISS: In fact, I will be passing a hat around after this meeting so be careful. Yes, our estimate is that we need about five million dollars to do this over the first five to six years. The governments of the United Kingdom, Sweden and The Netherlands along with the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation have contributed almost half of that. But indeed we still need -- the glass is still half empty.

LITTLEJOHNS: And the United States has shown no interest in coming up with some money apart from the foundation's you mentioned?

WEISS: Well, the foundations which, after all, are part of American taxpayers' contribution are about over half of this, but indeed Washington showed no interest in this although, as we mentioned earlier in our previous conversation, there are many officials within this administration and on the Hill who would be very interested in helping to alleviate the lamentable official position in Congress in relationship to the world Organization.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Weiss, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Thomas Weiss, Co-Director of the United Nations Intellectual History Project. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of *InterPress Service* and John Metzler of USA Radio Network. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the program may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped self addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827, New York New York 10017. **World Chronicle** is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This program is a public affairs presentation of this station, from United Nations Radio and Television.